The Application of Free Web Tools to E-learning Platforms for Integrating Cantonese Opera into Hong Kong Chinese Language Education in the Era of Web 2.0

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Abstract: : This article presents the application of weblogs as e-learning platforms to the new curriculum for integrating Cantonese opera into Chinese language education in Hong Kong. The application is outstanding because it is applied to such a unique curriculum which contains rich and varied learning content from language to literature and from culture to performing arts. The richness and variety of the curriculum in turn favour the trial of choosing and integrating free web tools into weblogs as e-learning platforms. Apart from setting up weblogs for learners by the authority centrally, learners can scaffold their own weblogs as learning outcomes. It is found that weblogs embedded with web tools as e-learning platforms can enrich the curriculum, and the learners can acquire new literacy on the top of learning content. As other explorations of this kind are mostly confined to a smaller scope (such as a particular course by an individual teacher), it is hoped that the empirical study reported in this article would be a significant reference to applications of Web 2.0 in education.

Keywords: Cantonese Opera, E-learning, Language Education, Web Tools, Web 2.0

Background

CANTONESE OPERA IS a valuable asset of the Chinese culture and is also the essence of Hong Kong's culture. However, a recent survey[1] of audiences of Cantonese opera in Hong Kong revealed that the age group of 10 – 29 only accounts for 2.6% of the total audience. This low percentage reflects that there is a large gap in the young Hong Kong people who are appreciating their heritage of Cantonese opera. The integration of Cantonese opera into the secondary school curriculum has been a significant educational development in Hong Kong (Ng, Chung & Lam, 2009). The teaching of Cantonese opera will enhance students' articulation and aesthetic capacities. It will also help to enrich their learning experiences with culture, art performance, literature, music and the arts, and through doing so to cultivate their pride in Chinese culture. It is an effective way to reduce the gap and preserve this local traditional art.

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[1] The survey was conducted by the *Hong Kong Opera Preview* and commissioned by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council. The findings were published in June 2009. The total number of people watching Cantonese opera in Hong Kong was 295,825. The age group distribution was as follows: 9 and below (0.4%), 10-19 (1.1%), 20-29 (1.5%), 30-49 (15.5%), 50-69 (69.1%), 70 and above (12.4%).

The senior secondary school curriculum in Hong Kong would be restructured in the year 2009, and a "3-3-4" (3 years of junior secondary, 3 years of high school and 4 years of university) education structure will be introduced. For the past three years, scholars in the Faculty of Education of The University of Hong Kong (HKU) have been working on the "Integrate Cantonese Opera in Education" Project[2]. The third stage of the Project was completed on 23rd May, 2009, with its "Reporting Session and Showcase", in which teachers and students of the 11 partner schools gathered at HKU to share their teaching, learning and cultural experiences. The reports included teachers' teaching experiences, students' learning projects or fieldtrip reports, and students' stage performances of Cantonese Opera elements. In the past two stages of the Project, the focus was on integrating these experiences into the Chinese language subject. In this final stage, the Project has launched a pilot programme to integrate Cantonese opera into the Form 6 Chinese literature curriculum, and has initiated the use of problem-based learning based on Cantonese Opera themes into liberal studies. The Project also organized four sessions of teacher training, conducted by veteran Cantonese opera artists, to let teachers have a more thorough understanding of Cantonese opera so as to prepare them for teaching with confidence in class. A Chinese book titled *"Legend of Purple Hairpin" Classroom* (紫釵記教室), which is a compilation of teaching materials and learning experiences from the Project, will be published. The book will be free for local secondary schools for teaching reference.

Learning Content and Curriculum

Cantonese opera is Hong Kong's art with local characteristics. It is an entertainment, but it also incorporates abundant language (Cantonese), literature and cultural content. A famous Chinese scholar, Qi Ru Shan (齊如山), described Chinese opera as "an integrated art full of history, literature, music, vocal music, dance, martial arts. It uses singing and dancing to present emotional action and feelings, and is a national art for promoting traditional Chinese moralities"[3]. Cantonese opera, as one of the Chinese opera forms, also includes these artistic characteristics. **The use of this integrated art form as learning content necessitates the differentiation of components of learning and scaffolding of the parts into a whole.**

The new senior secondary Chinese language curriculum emphasizes "the cultivation of integrated ability in language usage" and "the nurturing of mind and sentiments". It enables students "to experience the rich humanities content and taste the feeling of literature through the diversified learning materials, so as to inspire their lives". It also lets students "brush up their knowledge, introspection and pride in Chinese culture"[4]. Through studying scripts in class, participating in performance workshops, watching professional performance in theatre, and integrating these with special topics on culture (e.g. case study of traditional Cantonese opera in shed theatres), students can identify Chinese traditional values and foster positive attitudes and moral values.

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[2] For the details of the Project, please browse its weblog at http://yuejuedu.blogspot.com

[3] "Preface", Qi Ru Shan: *Graphical Illustration of Chinese Opera* (tranlation of *Guoju Tupu*) (Taipei: Youshi Wenhua Shiye, 1977), 6.

[4] "Course Structure and Organization" (translation), Curriculum Development Council and the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority: *Chinese Language Key Learning Area Curriculum and Assessment Guide (Form 4 to 6)* (Hong Kong: Curriculum Development Council and the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority, 2007), 29.

The learning content of Cantonese opera in education can be summarized in Figure 1: Script is the core, and script study contains plot, stage performance and language. Stage performance can be individually developed into the learning of **performing arts**. Plot, stage performance and language can be collectively developed into the learning of **culture and values** [5].

Performance   Performing Arts

Script

Stage Performance

Character   Song, Dance and Dialogue

Plot   Language
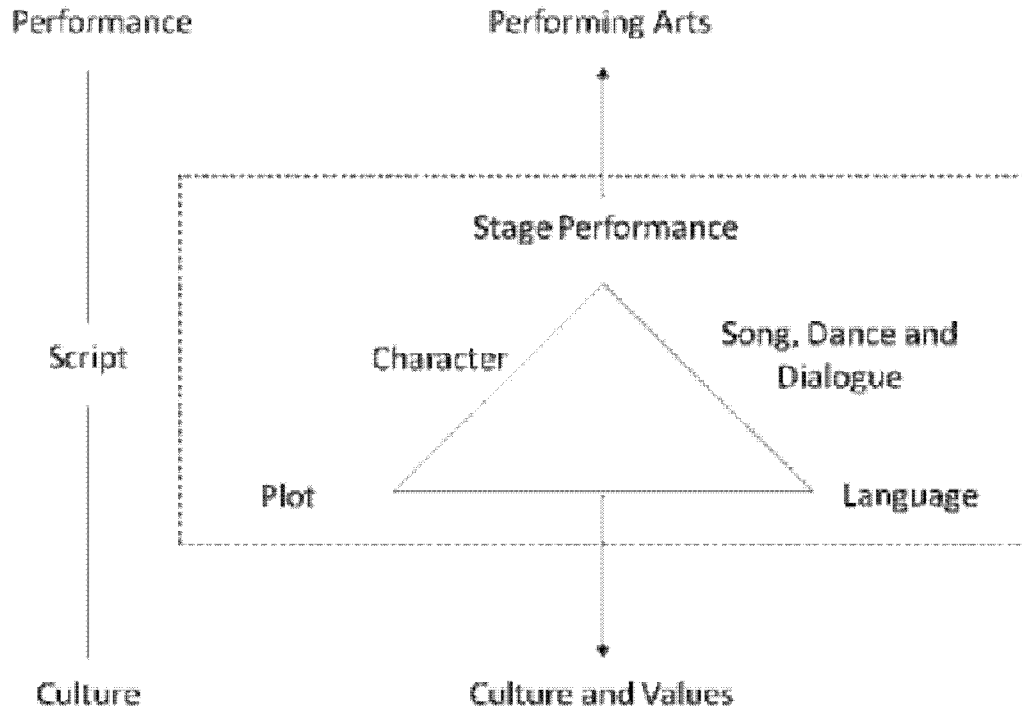
Culture   Culture and Values

Figure 1: Learning Content of Cantonese Opera in Education

Based on the rich and varied learning content, a unique curriculum has been devised by the Project, which consists of four learning components: Cantonese opera script, performance practicum, watching stage performance and shed theatre exploration. The elements of each component are listed in the Figure 2 below[6].

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[5] For more details of the learning content, please refer to our previous article, i.e. Ng, Dorothy F. P., Lam, Joseph W. I. & Chung, Albert L. S. (2009). Curriculum Development and Strategies of Integrating Cantonese Opera in Chinese Language Education in Hong Kong. *The International Journal of Learning*, 15, 59-66.

[6] For more details about the learning components, please refer to our previous article, i.e. Ng, Dorothy F. P., Lam, Joseph W. I. & Chung, Albert L. S. (2009). Curriculum Development and Strategies of Integrating Cantonese Opera in Chinese Language Education in Hong Kong. *The International Journal of Learning*, 15, 59-66.
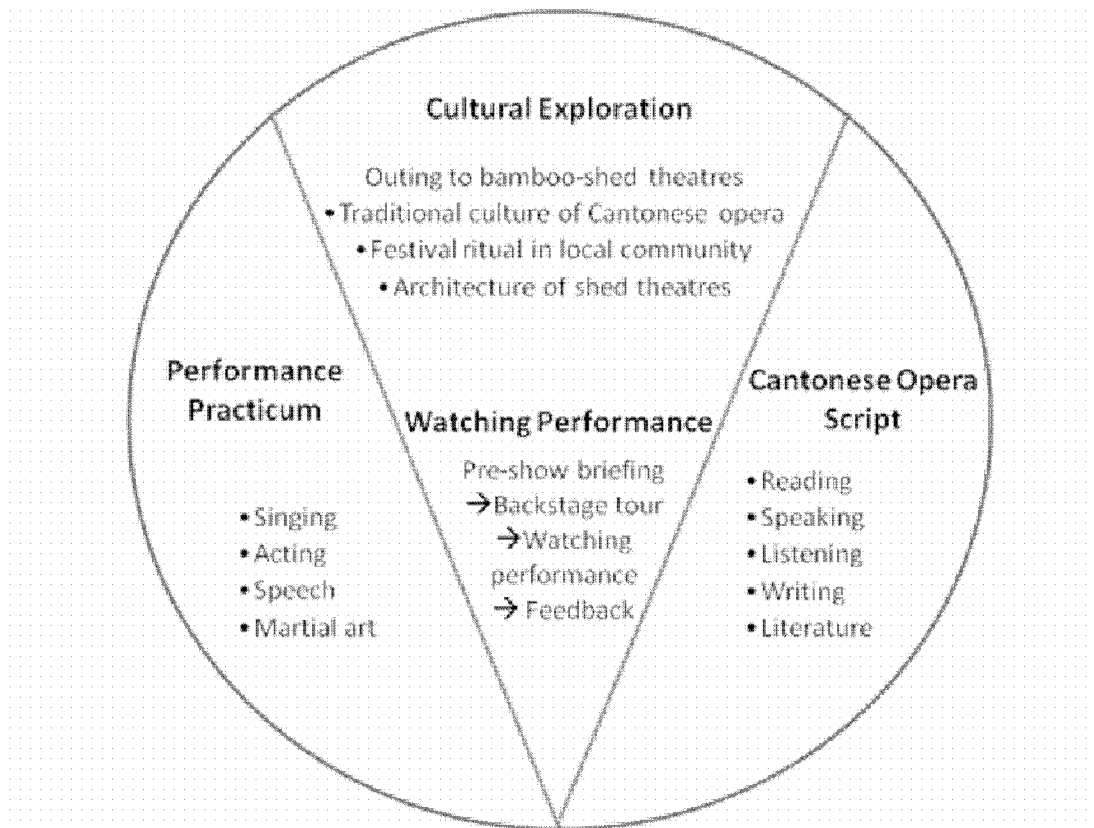
Figure 2: Curriculum Components of Cantonese Opera in Education

Weblogs as E-learning Platforms

In the era of Web 2.0, free web tools have emerged and become popular. One of these, Weblog, is a common tool which can be converted into an e-learning platform by embedding other web tools into it. **Weblog provides a common ground. By choosing different web tools, scaffolding and integrating them onto a weblog, different e-learning platforms can be formed for particular learning purposes or curriculum components.**

The advantages of weblogs as e-learning platforms include multi-media interface, inclusive nature of embedding, and interactivity in cyberspace, which foster feedback and sharing for collaborative learning.

The **multi-media interface** of weblogs is ideal for showing the audio-visual elements of Cantonese opera. Unlike the e-learning platform in Web 1.0 (such as WebCT), the videos can be played and watched directly on the interface. File download and opening with software are no longer needed. By watching the performance format along with the opera script, students can have a deeper understanding than just reading the plain text. Figure 3 shows a video clip demonstrating the platter speech (白欖) as an example. Without watching the demonstration, students would not be able to understand its narrative rhythm.

Figure 3: Screen Capture from Weblog B

The **interactive nature** of weblogs can foster collaborative learning among students. Each weblog post has provision for comments or feedback at the bottom. Therefore, collaborative learning can be focused as students exchange views on a particular topic by giving comments or feedback to the same weblog post. Figure 4 shows how students share their views on the traditional Cantonese opera performed in the bamboo-shed theatres by responding to the same weblog post.

Figure 4: Screen Capture from Weblog C

Such collaborative learning takes place after class and beyond school as long as students can access the weblogs via the Internet.

The **openness to cyberspace** can further enrich the collaborative learning. Apart from students, other Internet users (who may be the experts on that aspect) can also give comments and feedback[7]. Besides, some free web tools would introduce relevant resources. For example, after a YouTube video is played, relevant videos will appear for selection. This can facilitate further study for deeper learning.

Using weblogs as e-learning platforms is consistent with the **trend of learning with IT (information technology)**. Being digital natives[8], the students have potential to learn effectively with e-learning platforms. Apart from learning the subject matter (i.e. Cantonese opera), the students can acquire other literacy needed in this digital world. The graphic below (Churchill, 2009) depicts the seven kinds of today's literacy:

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[7] A weblog can be set private and confined to the prescribed users in order to protect privacy or to avoid disturbance if needed.

[8] A digital native is a person for whom digital technologies already existed when they were born, and hence has grown up with digital technology such as computers, the Internet, mobile phones and MP3s. Marc Prensky is acknowledged to have coined the term *digital native* in his work *Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants* published in 2001.

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Figure 5: Seven Kinds of Today's Literacy (Churchill, 2009)

Traditional Literacy is the ability to read, write, speak and listen. Information Literacy is the ability to identity what information is needed and the ability to locate, evaluate and use information. Visual Literacy is the ability to understand and produce visual messages. Critical Literacy is the ability to question, challenge and evaluate the meanings and purposes of texts. Media Literacy is the ability to question, analyze, interpret, evaluate and create media messages. Tool literacy is the ability to use tools to manage, consume and create information. Digital literacy is the ability to use digital technology, communication tools or networks to locate, evaluate, use and create information.

Project E-learning Platforms

In its second stage, the Project started its development on the Internet. Apart from the usual applications for general information such as a weblog as a portal (Blogger), a web photo album (Picasa), and a video channel (YouTube), the Project initiated **weblogs as e-learning platforms to work with the curriculum components**. As a pilot, three different weblogs as e-learning platforms were formed for the students of collaborating schools. These contain different learning contents and adopt different approaches as illustrated below:

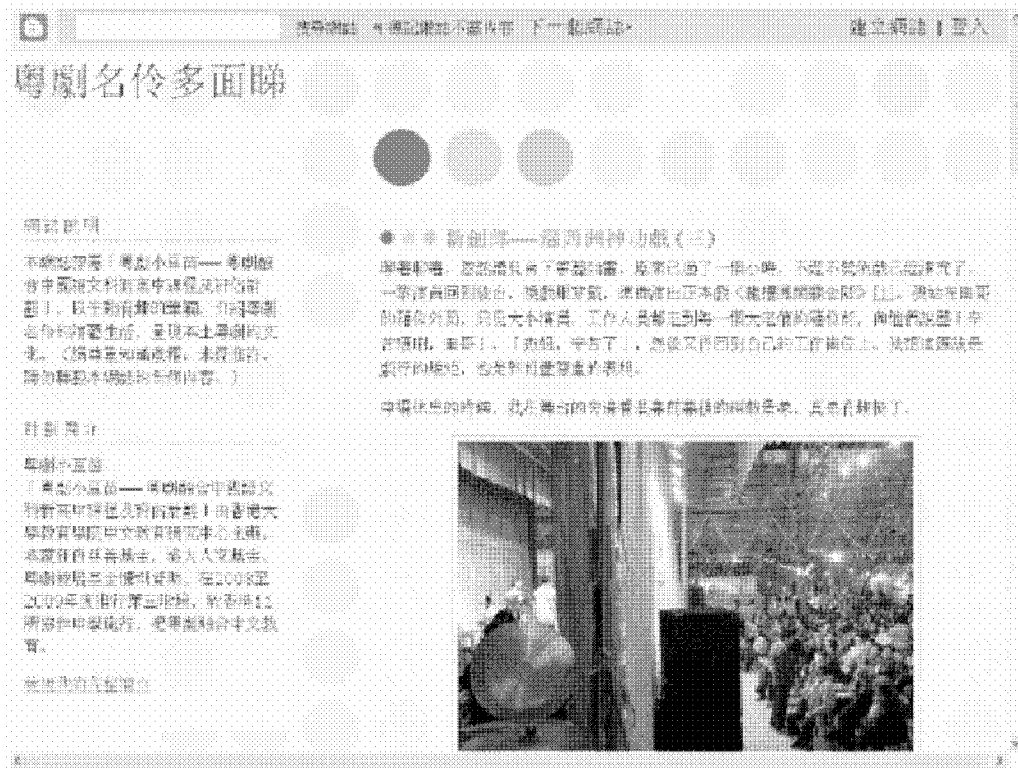## Weblog A: Interesting Story-telling of Behind-the-scene for Knowledge Acquisition

Figure 6: Screen Capture from Weblog A

Weblog A presents the life behind the scene of a veteran Cantonese opera actor in an interesting tone, like story-telling. Students can acquire basic knowledge about Cantonese opera through reading the weblog posts. Selected photos are embedded to illustrate the text.

Weblog A is in the basic format of weblog, i.e. an online diary or journal. By browsing it, students can strengthen their reading ability (traditional literacy) for online texts.

Weblog A relates to the whole curriculum in Figure 2 because it contains knowledge about Cantonese opera in general. The orientation towards a particular learning component can be directed by including specific content on that particular aspect.

Weblog B: Multi-media Showing for Art Appreciation of Classic Cantonese Opera

Figure 7: Screen Capture from Weblog B

Weblog B guides students to appreciate a classic Cantonese opera by embedding audio-visual tools. A slideshow is embedded to show the main cast (usually the six major roles 六柱). Then, videos of selected scenes are embedded with scripts or illustrations. The videos are kept short (usually in 2 or 3 minutes) so as to introduce the focus for appreciation (such as the specified speech arts (Figure 3) and the virtual performance formulae). Students can use this weblog for preparation before watching the whole opera in theatre.

As audio-visual tools are used, students can enhance their visual literacy by watching the video clips along with the text illustration.

Weblog B corresponds to Watching Stage Performance in Figure 2, which works with the pre-show briefing for students to prepare beforehand for understanding more when watching the performance. In addition, it also relates to Cantonese Opera Script in Figure 2 because it can facilitate the script study in Chinese lessons by visualizing the opera scenes for understanding.

Weblog C: Web Quest for Pre-visit Preparation for Cantonese Opera Bamboo-shed Theatres

Figure 8: Screen Capture from Weblog C

Weblog C corresponds to Shed Theatre Exploration in Figure 2. It provides input for students to prepare for their visits to Cantonese opera bamboo-shed theatres. Selected photos with leading questions about the intended areas of study (such as the architecture of bamboo-shed theatres, the festival and ritual culture, and the tradition of Cantonese opera) are posted in sequence to engage students in webquest to find their own answers. Students can share their pre-visit findings by posting comments to the weblog posts (see Figure 4). This kind of pre-visit webquest can lead students to observe the intended aspects during the visits for achieving desired learning outcomes.

Weblog C is shaped as webquest to develop students' information literacy. In response to the weblog posts, students identity what information is needed, and locate, evaluate and use information on the Internet.

The above three weblogs clearly show that weblogs embedded with web tools as e-learning platforms definitely empower the curriculum components and enrich the curriculum as a whole. Without the weblogs, the desired learning processes and outcomes cannot be achieved.

Student Weblogs as Learning Outcomes

In its third stage, the Project took a further step in the development of e-learning platforms. Apart from the weblogs provided by the Project, the students of two collaborating schools scaffolded their own weblogs as learning outcomes. From the scaffolding of weblogs, they learned more on Cantonese opera, and acquired corresponding literacy.

Individual Weblogs - Creative Writing (Through Role Play)

A Form 2 class of female students from School A did creative writing after they studied the script of *The Reincarnation of Lady Plum Blossom*《再世紅梅記》in Chinese lessons. The students were instructed to choose a role from the two actresses, and wrote about her mood or her reaction to deal with the situation in a particular scene on their individual weblogs. The following screen capture from student weblogs shows that they could do and learn more by using weblogs than by writing on paper.

Weblog D1: Choosing Appropriate Photos for Background and Profile

Figure 9: Screen Capture from Weblog D1

This student chose a photo of plum blossom as the background for the whole weblog to echo the script theme. She further selected a particular scene photo as her profile picture to represent her role play of the actress.

Weblog D2: Embedding another Art to Enrich the Writing

Figure 10: Screen Capture from Weblog D2

This student even embedded a painting with a caption to enrich her writing. Such enrichment requires deeper understanding of the script plot because an addition has to be selected and embedded appropriately. Technically, such enrichment is easier with weblog than with paper. That means the creativity can be enhanced and integrated by embedding tools on weblogs rather than just writing on paper.

Weblog D3: Feedback from Classmates (Collaborative Learning)

Figure 11: Screen Capture from Weblog D3

After this student posted a piece of writing about her decision made in role as the actress, her classmate posted feedback to support her decision. Such interaction by weblog fosters collaborative learning among students.

The above three student weblogs reveal that students can be trained to develop their critical literacy, namely the ability to question, challenge and evaluate the meanings and purposes of texts. By embedding appropriate photos or pictures and posting appropriate comments or feedback, students can acquire critical literacy skills for deeper understanding of the opera scripts.

Group Weblogs – Reports on Bamboo-shed Theatre Exploration

A Form 4 class from School B set up weblogs in groups to report on their visit to the bamboo-shed theatre. Before the visit, the students engaged the webquest of Weblog C for preparation. They were also given a briefing on the use of weblog and web tool application.

Weblog reports are better than booklet reports. The **multi-media interface** allows for the use of visual tools like photos, videos and other media to enrich the content in a way that cannot be done with text alone. The **vertical sequence** facilitates presentation in time sequence from pre-visit preparation to on-site observation to post-visit reflection. The **co-authorship**

allows students in the same group to work collaboratively at any time. The following screen capture are from the weblog of one student group as an exemplar:

Weblog E: Student Group Weblogs (Report on Bamboo-shed Theatre Exploration)

Attractive Weblog Layout

Figure 12: Screen Capture from Weblog E (Layout)

Students assembled several meaningful photos to form an attractive layout. The prime actress and actor, in opera costumes, are shown on the sidebars respectively. A picture of the distinctive boards outside the bamboo-shed theatre is used as the header. The weblog name coined to reflect the theme is in the right lower part of the header. This layout brings out the cultural characteristics of traditional Cantonese opera in the bamboo-shed theatre, which reflects that the students had a clear understanding of the subject matter.

Surrounding by this layout, the students well organized their presentation in sequence by weblog posts: history, festival, ceremony, theatre and opera. Apart from text, photos and videos were embedded to enrich the illustration of each topic.

Photo Taking on Site

Figure 13: Screen Capture from Weblog E (On-site photos embedded)

The students selected and embedded on-site photos along the text to illustrate the architecture of the bamboo-shed theatre.

Video Shooting on Site

Figure 14: Screen Capture from Weblog E (On-site video embedded)

The students took video clips on site of critical scenes[9] and embedded them to strengthen the opera description with audio-visual tools.

The above screen capture reveals that the students can develop tool literacy and digital literacy through scaffolding their weblogs. They can use digital cameras to take photos and shoot videos on site and then apply web tools to embed these appropriately along with the text description to create the report on their visit to the bamboo-shed theatre.

The Matrix of Weblogs as E-learning Platforms

From the elaboration on the above-mentioned weblogs of the Project, it can be evidenced that weblogs embedded with web tools as e-learning platforms can enrich the curriculum, and the learners can acquire new literacy on the top of learning content.

To sum up, the matrix below correlates the curriculum components, the learning content, the approach/format, the web tool application and the literacy for the above-mentioned weblogs.

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[9] As ethnical approval, the troupe signed an agreement with the Project on video shooting (and other data collection) for educational purposes before the visit.

Figure 15: Matrix of the Weblogs as E-learning Platforms

	Curriculum Components	Major Learning Content	Approach/ Format	Web Tool Application	Major Literacy
Weblog A (Project)	Whole	General	Story-telling	Text and photos	Traditional literacy (Reading)
Weblog B (Project)	Watching Stage Performance	Performing art	Audio-visual showing	Text, photos, slideshow and videos	Visual literacy
Weblog C (Project)	Shed Theatre Exploration	Culture	Webquest	Text, photos and links	Information literacy
Weblog D1, D2 & D3 (Individual student)	Script Study	Script	Creative writing	Text and photos with feedback by others	Critical literacy
Weblog E (Student Group)	Shed Theatre Exploration	Culture	Group project	Text, photos and videos in sequence	Tool literacy

In order to show the whole picture, a concept map for constructing learning space for Cantonese opera through weblogs as e-learning platforms in the era of Web 2.0 is drawn as below:
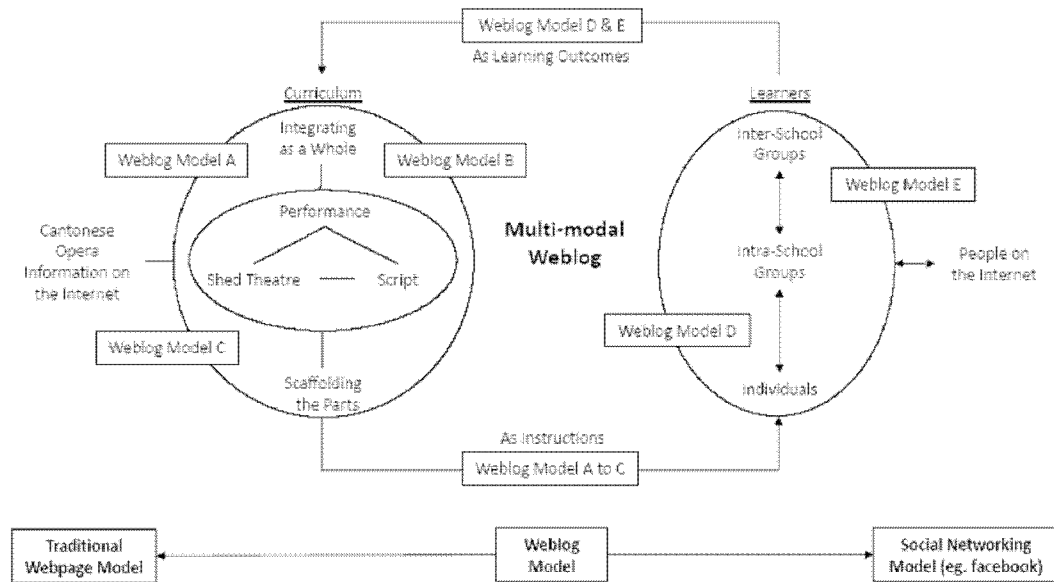

Figure 16: Constructing Learning Space for Cantonese Opera through Weblog in Web 2.0 Era

Conclusion & Evaluation

The above illustration shows that the trial of weblogs embedded with free web tools as e-learning platforms by the Project has achieved positive results. By evaluating the results, the following points can be raised as a basis for further exploration:

- **Weblogs as platforms are effective for learning.** Weblogs as platforms can create more learning possibilities (which cannot be obtained by hard copy materials). Unlike in the old days (Web 1.0) when platforms were only provided centrally by the authority, **students can create and scaffold their own weblogs for learning** (and also as learning) in the era of Web 2.0.
- **Further exploration corresponds with curriculum development.** As facilitation of curriculum development, weblog platforms correspond to respective curriculum components. In future, weblog platforms (with appropriate web tool applications to relevant learning content) for the performance practicum and the script writing will be explored.
- **Teacher instruction is important to learning outcomes.** From the two sets of student weblogs, it has been observed that the level of usage and application by students are correlated with teacher instruction. The level of individual weblogs of School A is elementary because the teacher did not make it compulsory for the students to write on weblogs. The level of group weblogs of School B is advanced because the teacher set the weblog as assessment, and a briefing about the weblog application was given to the students beforehand.
- **The traditional art can be promoted by the latest information technology.** Young students are digital natives. Weblogs can let them integrate Cantonese opera into their **daily lives**. Through the interactive nature of weblogs, **peer effects** among youngsters can be generated. As students become audiences in future, the potential sustainability of Cantonese opera is increased.

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Dr. Fung Ping (Dorothy) Ng
Dr. Ng joined The University of Hong Kong in 1995. She is currently an Assistant Professor within the Language and Literature division, Faculty of Education and was previously an Assistant Professor within the Department of Curriculum Studies. Dr. Ng is also a member of the Hong Kong University Fundraising committee. Dr. Ng's PhD titled "A study of the role of medium of instruction in mediating learning experience in CMI (Chinese as medium of instruction) and EMI (English as medium of instruction) classroom in Hong Kong" was nominated for the best thesis of Social Science in 2006. Of particular interest, Dr. Ng recently designed a new course to integrate Cantonese opera into the new senior Chinese language curriculum. To develop this course, Dr. Ng received a significant donation of 2.5 million. Cantonese opera is a significant cultural treasure and thus integrating it into the curriculum is a highly significant development in Hong Kong schools. Dr. Ng also has an interest in variation theory in teaching and learning and conducts workshops for teachers in developing reading skills training in Chinese.

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